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Breaking down barriers: Feminism, politics, and psychology

I think of myself as a feminist political psychologist, but what is the relationship between these three labels? For me, they are intricately bound together. It would not be possible for me to pursue my research in political psychology if I were to ignore gender as a central category in the way social, economic and political life are organized. Similarly, my feminism is very much connected to my political understanding of the world and how I perceive my positioning within it.

What do I mean when I say that feminism is central to the way I construct my self and my relationship to the world around me? Perhaps a personal story is appropriate here. Two years ago, when my daughter was seven, she was walking with her father, and quite out of the blue, asked him why so many bosses in the world were men. I came upon them deep in conversation, and contributed some of my own thoughts. Later, though, I decided I wanted to my daughter to have not only my voice but a chorus of different voices addressing this important issue, and so I wrote to some of the wonderful women who have been part of my life and described to them the conversation I had happened upon. Would they, I wondered, be willing share with my daughter their thoughts and experiences of dealing with this challenge? The response to this request was overwhelming: the pages of the book I presented to my daughter for her 8th birthday were full of poems, pictures, stream of consciousness narratives, and personal letters (one beginning 'you are eight today, and I am 89'). What has this to do with feminism? Susan Faludi writes that

> "Feminism's agenda is basic: It asks that women not be forced to "choose" between public justice and private happiness. It asks that women be free to define themselves—instead of having their identity defined for them, time and again, by their culture and their men. (1991; p.xxiii)

I didn't want my daughter to feel that she would one day have to choose between public justice and private happiness, and nor did I want her to feel that she was alone in her observations. The first step in combating an unfair situation is identifying the challenge, and this was the road that my seven-year-old was already embarking upon. This, for me, is the strength that comes from feminism: it provides us with a powerful analytic tool – not the only one, but a very important one – which enhances our appreciation of the dynamic relationship between social structure and individual biography. It helps us think to think more deeply about why more bosses are men than women.

More than a decade ago, in the opening pages of a book I published on lifetime socialist activists, I had this critique to make of Political Psychology:

> Political Psychology is the area of psychology which has sought to grapple with questions regarding the intersection between psychology and politics. Unfortunately, however, it has failed to adopt a sufficiently political orientation, and thus has succeeded only in psychologizing politics, reducing political behaviour to a study of one psychological process or another. There has been a systematic neglect of the consideration of the social, political and historical influences which command an essential role in human development; by focusing exclusively on intra-psychic processes, behaviour which derives its very meaning from the context in which it exists or to which it is

> responding can instead be portrayed as idiosyncratic and/or irrational. Sadly there has been little evidence of the reverse effect, that is the politicization of psychology (Andrews 1991: 14).

Not a lot has changed in the intervening years since I wrote that passage. The conjoining of psychology and politics continues to be characterized by an unbalanced weighting between the two disciplines. I received training as both a political scientist and as a psychologist, and the frameworks which we are taught to use in these disciplines rarely converge. The politics of psychology, with its earmark of rugged individualism, have more often than not acted as a barrier against the psychology of politics.

But this barrier begins to be broken down with a feminist political psychology. Feminism demands of us that the starting point of any psychological investigation is an individual's positioning within the wider social structure. It challenges the dichotomy between individual and society, insisting instead on the fluidity between these categories. There is no component of an individual's make-up which is not also social, and conversely, the concept of social structure only derives its meaning in a world inhabited by individual people.

To apply feminist scholarship to political psychological questions does not mean insisting on a gender analysis to the exclusion of all other lenses, but rather to take seriously the impact of social structure on the domain of the psychological, with particular focus on gender. In the past two decades, I have conducted a number of studies, in four different countries, exploring how and why people think and act the

way they do in particular political settings. In the myriad of stories I have collected in this time, there is virtually no evidence to support essentialist claims that women are one way (more peace-loving, less aggressive), and men are another (violent by nature, domineering). This construction of the world has always struck me as fundamentally problematic, not least because it does not progress us out of our hunter/gatherer roles. It also predetermines the fate of my young son, who continues to amaze me with his open approach to the world.

Rather, feminism provides us with an analytic tool to help us make sense of our own world, the worlds of others, and the connections between them. Investigation of the social and psychic worlds of others necessarily involves self-scrutiny; we acknowledge our subjective position vis a vis others, and accept that responsible research demands that this position itself be the target of ongoing reflection. These feminist considerations lie at the heart of a reflexive, situationally-sensitive political psychology.

To illustrate my argument, I would like to discuss briefly two cases. Elizabeth and Christopher were both in their seventies when I began interviewing them for a study of lifetime socialist activists in England in the late 1980s. As with other participants in the study, I interviewed them each for approximately six hours, with the intention of focussing the discussion on the relationship between their political beliefs and activism throughout their lives. I wanted to learn from them why they felt they had become the people they were; what did they identify as pivotal influences, obstacles, inspirations? As a feminist, I was confident that gender would play a critical role in these narrations. Ultimately, that was true, but not in the way that I had anticipated.

When I asked Elizabeth how important it was to her that she was a woman, her response was succinct. She was, she told me, "not very conscious of being a woman... I'm just a human being." Only moments later in our interview, she seemed to contradict this statement, outlining for me the different circumstances encountered by herself and her husband on the domestic front. She explained this to me:

> I think to be a good house wife you get a jolly good training really in keeping the needs of your family, the needs of the house, the needs of the food, and all the rest of it, and they're things that you've got to keep on the boil, or simmering, all the time. Whereas a man can go into his study and shut out the outside world and get on with whatever it is he's doing. A woman has got to keep an eye on all the other things, and be responsible for them (Andrews 2002a: 70).

Although here Elizabeth used impersonal pronouns to make her point, it is clear that she was speaking from her personal experience. Moreover, she knew I was aware of this, as descriptions of home life had occupied much of our time together. What fascinated me was the mismatch between her personal narratives and her implicit non-gendered theory about the world (she sees herself as 'just a human being'). Was she really not conscious of being a woman? I think the answer is both yes and no. From her point of view, women and men performed different functions in both the public and private sphere, and in this materialist sense, gender is important, if not deterministic. But while her day to day responsibilities are defined by her womanhood, her self-identity is not. The question which this presented to me, and which lingered for some time, was 'why'. The categories that seemed to me to

emerge with most salience in Elizabeth's accounts were not in fact important to her self concept; this had as much to do with me as it did to do with her. My challenge as a feminist and as a scholar was not to deny this difference, but to try to make sense of it.

But while Elizabeth explicitly rejected the importance of a gender perspective to her self-understanding and worldview, Christopher embraced it. Describing feminism as "a new emergence as important as any our species has so far experienced, comparable with the advents of speech, of writing, of philosophy, of science…" Christopher regarded feminism not just as theory, but a politics of "who does the washing up or fetches the children from school." He reflected on the importance of this analytic perspective in his own political development:

> I now feel that politically I have arrived, I'm not going to change again, I'm not going to get off the bus I'm in now onto some other bus that I don't yet know about. Because this bus seems to be the right one, in the sense that it correlates with everything else in life… If I say 'I've arrived' I only mean I've arrived at what Carlos Castaneda … called 'a path with heart'… a path one can follow with the consent of all one's being. (Andrews 2002b: 23-24)

What was it about feminism that was so compelling for Christopher? As an older, white, middle-class man, why did he attach so much importance to it, why did he see in it 'a path with heart'? His views on feminism required me to explore connections between his biography, his politics, and the world he inhabited.

Feminist methodology operates on the primary principle that we must take seriously the viewpoints ('voices') of those who participate in our research. My challenge, then, as a feminist political psychologist, was not only to comprehend the political worldviews of Elizabeth and Christopher individually, but to contemplate the differences between them. Is this analysis compromised because Christopher, a man, embraces feminism, whereas for Elizabeth gender plays no role in her explicit political theory? I don't think so. My challenge was to understand the different positions from which these two people spoke, and to think about why one might be drawn to feminism while the other not. If feminism, as stated earlier, is a primary lens through which to interpret the relationship between individuals and social structure, then it is ideally suited as an analytic tool for understanding the viewpoints of Elizabeth and Christopher. Here, then, a feminist analysis challenges essentialism while at the same time enhancing the interpretive potential of the political psychologist.

At one point in our interviews together, Elizabeth describes a rather difficult time she went through.

> I was relying too much on him [her husband] and his attitudes and trying to be a good wife. I mean I think it's something t o do with the kind of loyalty and bringing up your children and all the rest of it… I just felt life wasn't worth living. My roots were just in a hollow with no nourishment. I was cut off completely (1991:161).

In this description lies one possible explanation for why she did not embrace gender as a salient category. Given her own life circumstances, bringing up four sons and

being a dedicated housewife, it might have felt disloyal to those who were most central in her life. For Christopher, on the other hand, feminism brought him closer to those he cared for most, and in it he found reason for hope for the future. When Christopher was growing up, his mother had bouts of manic depression, and at the time that I first met him, his wife was suffering from a degenerative, debilitating disease from which she ultimately died. Somehow for Christopher feminism offered a bridge between personal circumstances and the wider world. It was a lens which contained a larger, more encompassing vision. There are, of course, other possible explanations of why Christopher might have been drawn to feminism, while Elizabeth was not, but ultimately these matter little. What is much more important are the questions which linger with us.

I began this reflective piece by questioning the relationship between feminism, politics, and psychology. Feminism is inherently political; it is a critical tool for understanding a primary dimension of power relations in the social world. A feminist political psychology is one which refuses to polarize the individual and the social, but rather regards them as intricately bound one to other. Feminist political psychology reinserts the political back into psychology.

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